

Soft Skills: Education Beyond Technical Knowledge

Dr. Neeta Sharma

Prof.& Head (Dept. of Humanities)

Technocrats Institute of Technology

Bhopal.

Abstract

This paper makes a survey of the importance of soft skills in the lives of students' at the college level and after college. This paper discusses how soft skills complement hard skills, which are the basic requirements of a job the student is trained to do. The paper exhorts educators/faculties to take special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' university time, educators/faculties plays a major role on the development of their students' soft skills. Embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and an enhancement of soft skills. Soft skills fulfil an important role in the career and future by shaping the personality of an individual. It is of great importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge.

Key Words: complement, exhorts, embedding, enhancement, shaping, adequate.

Introduction

For decades employers as well as educators complain about a lack in soft skills among graduates from tertiary education institutions. Predominantly missed is communication skills, which is desirable for graduates entering the business world. This problem is in no way restricted to developing nations; it is also well known to industrial countries around the world. A recent outcry in this regard came from the British Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), which recently reported that "Employers say many graduates lack 'soft skills', such as team working" and "They go on to explain that candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning."

What are soft skills?

Before going any further in debating the importance of soft skills it is better to clarify the question "What exactly are soft skills?" The online encyclopaedia "Wikipedia" gives a very broad definition of soft skills, which leaves much room for discussion: "Soft skills refer to the

cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job.” (Wikipedia, 2007)

From the above definition it becomes clear that we are looking at three very different skill categories, i.e.

- Personal qualities,
- Interpersonal skills, and
- Additional skills / knowledge

In the classical sense and according to the Wikipedia definition the term “soft skills” primarily refers to the first two categories of personal qualities and interpersonal skills including language skills.

Can personal traits and habits be changed?

As recognised earlier, a large part of soft skills relates to personal traits and habits. Thus, an interesting question to ask is whether a person’s traits and habits can be changed or improved. Anybody raising children or living with a partner who has irritating habits, might be tempted to answer that the task of changing personal traits is extremely difficult, if not impossible. The corporate trainer and instructional designer **Rukmini Iyer** has a strikingly simple answer to this question: *“There is a lot of argument in industry as to whether it is possible to enhance soft skills in a few hours of training, especially when one considers the fact that a person has lived with those traits all his life. To this, the answer is harsh but real -- a professional who wants to do well in his / her career does not really have a choice.”* (Iyer, 2005) The key aspect in this regard is a person’s ability to recognise and acknowledge certain behavioural shortfalls or plain bad habits. As a German proverb states: *“Self-recognition is the first step towards improvement”*. For example many people are not fond of doing small talk, a common characteristic among those working in a scientific or technical environment. The reasons might vary: shyness, introverted character, lack of “how to”, boredom, etc. However, small talk is an important part of communication skills necessary to display social competence. Once having acknowledged this truth, a person can undergo a simple self-training or guided training to improve the lacking skill. There are for instance many books available on the issue of “Small Talk”. Forthwith, the person can make it a habit at parties or social gatherings to initiate a conversation with at least three strangers. While the first times might require quite an effort, after a few months the frequent

chatting with strangers will become a second nature. With such and similar easy exercises even a very introverted person can appear reasonably sociable.

In summary, this means that negatively perceived personal traits could be changed or successfully covered by undergoing self-imposed training. Only prerequisite is that one acknowledges one's weakness and takes the decision to change it. Training will most likely be unsuccessful if one is not fully convinced that it will lead to any beneficial improvement.

Why are soft skills important?

After having elaborated so much on soft skills, the answer to why they are so important is still open. One straightforward reason is today's job-market, which in many fields is becoming increasingly competitive. To be successful in this tough environment, candidates for jobs have to bring along a "competitive edge" that distinguishes them from other candidates with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. And where do they find this competitive advantage? In bringing along additional knowledge and skills, added up by convincing personal traits and habits. The employers prefer to take in job candidates who will be productive from a very early stage on. If a graduate from university first has to be trained on putting more than three sentences together, how to do a proper presentation, or how to chat in a pleasant and winning manner with colleagues and customers, this graduate will not qualify as a quick starter. Also basic knowledge in business management, project management and general economy will improve the chances of a job candidate considerably. Already during the job interview itself good communication skills are invaluable.

They can even serve to successfully cover up weaknesses on the hard skills side. The advantages of displaying positive traits like courtesy, honesty, flexibility, common sense, flawless appearance, etc. during a job interview have not even to be discussed. Vice versa, it unfortunately happens very seldom that a job candidate who was rejected because of inadequate soft skills is told the truth about the reason for rejection. The employers usually give no reason or even vague misleading reasons for rejections, which are of no help at all for the unlucky candidates.

Once employed, the success story of people who know how to master soft skills continues because of much better career opportunities. It is a simple fact, which can be verified in daily business life, is that employers prefer to promote staff members with superior soft skills. Good hard skills alone are not enough anymore to be the first choice when it comes to promotion.

Soft skills are shaping human beings personality. Any educator's dream is that graduates, especially from tertiary education institutions, should not only be experts in a certain field but matured personalities with a well balanced, rounded off education. During the last decades in many societies the opinion on soft skills has changed considerably. Whereas in the past the mastering of hard skills was rated first and soft skills were considered as "nice to have", the perception has been turned upside down. As mentioned before, good communication skills can easily be used to cover up a lack in hard skills. Nowadays in general, people who are extroverted, who are good in marketing themselves, and who are socialising easily are rated superior to others who lack those attributes.

This development is not necessarily positive, and it must be allowed to ask the question, whether today soft skills are over emphasised. When Germany in 2003 scored a disastrously bad result in the European evaluation of its school learners' knowledge, the so-called PISA study (PISA, 2003), educational experts were quick in explaining that the tests were unfair, because they only probed the hard skills of learners; the fact that the German students might be good in discussing issues and have nice personality traits was not considered in those tests. This graduate will not qualify as a quick starter. Also basic knowledge in business management, project management and general economy will improve the chances of a job candidate considerably. Already during the job interview itself good communication skills are invaluable. They can even serve to successfully cover up weaknesses on the hard skills side. Don't we all know colleagues who are splendid talkers, but there is no action forthcoming from their side? The advantages of displaying positive traits like courtesy, honesty, flexibility, common sense, flawless appearance, etc. during a job interview have not even to be discussed.

What can lecturers do to enhance their students' soft skills?

The first step in improving soft skills of students is to raise their awareness about the importance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard. Students should be encouraged to enhance their soft skills by applying the methods we mentioned before, e.g. reading dedicated books, attending courses, and joining clubs or societies to broaden their horizon, like debating societies, Toast Masters who are practicing Rhetoric, or scientific societies who offer presentations and discussions. A formal approach to the problem would be to incorporate soft skills subjects into a programme's curriculum. On lower levels a course that requires students to do a bit of research and to present their results to the class afterwards has been proven as being quite effective. On graduate level a course on management skills, including

e.g. some communication skills together with the management of time, conflict, cultural issues, and of major importance, oneself, has in practice been well received by students.

However, very often the curricula are already overloaded with hard skills courses, making it almost impossible to add or substitute courses. Furthermore, other lecturers might be ignorant of the importance of soft skills and hence, do not support dedicated courses in this regard. A very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes to a programme's curriculum are necessary; instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology.

Conclusion

Considering the fact that during the last decades in society the perceived importance of soft skills has increased significantly, it is of high importance for everyone to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. This is not particularly difficult. Once a shortcoming in a certain area of soft skills has been identified at oneself, there are numerous ways of rectifying such a deficiency. Educators have a special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' School and University time they have major impact on the development of their students' soft skills. Besides raising awareness regarding the importance of soft skills and encouraging students to improve their skills, lecturers should actively practice soft skills with their students. A very effective and efficient way of doing this is to include soft skills training into the teaching of hard skills. As a positive side effect the lessons will become more attractive, which in turn will increase the success rate of learners. Soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality by complementing his/her hard skills. However, over-emphasising it to such an extent should not taint the importance of soft skills, that hard skills, i.e. expert knowledge in certain fields, are demoted to secondary importance.

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